

NAN of MUSIC MOUNTAIN

By Frank H. Spearman
Author of Whispering Smith

CHAPTER XXIII—Continued.

De Spain suspected nothing of what they were talking about, but he was uneasy concerning Nan, and was not to be balked, by any combination, of his purpose of finding her. To secure information concerning her was not possible, unless he should enter the house, and this with some hesitation, he decided to do.

He wore a snug-fitting leather coat. He unbuttoned this and threw it open as he stepped noiselessly up to the door. Laying his hand on the knob, he pushed, then, finding the door unlocked, he pushed it slowly open.

The wind, rushing in, upset his calculations and blew open the door leading from the hall into the living room. A stream of light in turn shot through the open door, across the hall. In stantly De Spain stepped inside and directly behind the front door—which he now realized he dare not close—and stood expectant in the darkness. Gale Morgan, with an impatient exclamation, strode from the fireplace to close the front door.

As he walked into the hall and slammed the front door shut, he could have touched with his hand the man standing in the shadow behind it. De Spain, not hoping to escape, stood with folded arms, but under the elbow of his left arm was hidden the long muzzle of his revolver. Holding his breath, he waited. Gale's mind was apparently filled with other things. He did not suspect the presence of an intruder, and he walked back into the living room, partly closing the second door. De Spain, following almost on his heels, stepped upon this door, just the hall stairs opposite it, and through a curtain opening at the end of the hall into the dining room. Barely ten feet from him, this room opened through an arch into the living room, and where he stood he could hear all that was said.

"Who's there?" demanded Duke gruffly.

"Nobody," said Gale. "Go on, Drue."

Drue talked softly and through his nose: "I was only going to say it would be a good idea to have two witnesses."

"Nan," suggested Gale.

Duke was profane. "You couldn't keep the girl in the room if she had Nina to help her. And I want it understood, Gale, between you and me, fair and square, that Nan's gone to live right here with me after this marriage till I'm satisfied she's willing to go to you—otherwise it can't take place, now or never."

De Spain opened his ears. Gale felt the hard, cold tone of his crusty relative, and answered with like harshness: "What do you keep harping on that for? You've got my word. All I want of you is to keep yours—understand?"

"Come, come," interposed Drue. "There's no need of hard words. But we need two witnesses. Who's going to be the other witness?"

Before anyone could answer De Spain stepped out into the open archway before the three men. "I'll act as the second witness," he said.

With a common roar the Morgans bounded to their feet. De Spain, standing slightly aside, his coat lapels flapped wide open, his arms akimbo, and his hands on his hips, faced the three in an attitude of readiness only. He had reckoned on the instant of indecision which at times, when coupled with apprehension, paralyzes the will of two men acting together. Under the circumstances either of the Morgans alone would have whipped a gun on De Spain at sight. Together, and knowing that to do so meant death to the one that took the first shot from the archway, each waited for the other; that fraction of a second unsettled their purpose. Instead of bullets, each launched curses at the intruder, and every second that passed led away from a fight.

De Spain took their outbursts, demands and abuse without batting an eye. "I'm here for the second witness," was all he repeated, covering both men with short glances. Drue, his face muddily white as the whiskey-blast deserted it, shrunk inside his shabby clothes. De Spain with each epithet hurled at him took a dreaded step toward Gale, and Drue, in the line of fire, brought his knees up and his head down till he curled like a porcupine.

Gale, game as he undoubtedly was, cornered, felt perhaps recollections of Calabans and close quarters with the brown eyes and the burning face. What they might mean in this little room, which De Spain was crossing step by step, was food for thought. Nor did De Spain break his obstinate silence until their burst of rage had blown. "You've arranged your marriage," he said at length. "Now pull it."

"My cousin's ready to marry me, and she's going to do it tonight," cried Gale violently.

Duke, towering with rage, looked at De Spain and pointed to the hall

door. "You hear that! Get out of my house!" he cried, launching a vicious epithet with the words.

"This isn't your house," retorted De Spain angrily. "This house is Nan's, not yours. When she orders me out, I'll go. Bring her down," he thundered, raising his voice to shout at Duke, who had redoubled his abuse. "Bring her into this room," he repeated. "We'll see whether she wants to get married. If she does, I'll marry her. If she doesn't, and you've been putting this up to force her into marrying so help me God, you'll be carried out of this room tonight, or I will."

He whirled on her niece with an accusing finger. "You used to be a man, Duke. I've taken from you here to-night what I would take from no man on earth but for the sake of Nan Morgan. She asked me never to touch you. But if you've gone into this thing to trap your own flesh and blood, your own brother's girl, living under your own protection, you don't deserve mercy, and tonight you shall have what's coming to you. I've fought you both fair, too fair. Now—before I leave—it's my girl or both of you."

He was standing near Drue. Without taking his eyes off the other man, he caught Drue with his left hand by the coat collar, and threw him half-way across the room. "Get up there, you old currier, and tell Nan Morgan Henry De Spain is here to talk to her."

Drue, frightened to death, scrambled into the hall. He turned on De Spain. "I'm an officer of the law. I arrest you for trespass and assault," he shouted, shaking with fear.

"Arrest me!" echoed De Spain contemptuously. "You scoundrel, if you don't climb those stairs, I'll send you to the penitentiary the day I get back to town. Upstairs with your message!"

"It isn't necessary," said a low voice in the hall, and with the words Nan appeared in the open doorway. Her face was white, but there was no sign of haste or panic in it; De Spain choked back a breath; to him she had never looked in her silence so awe-inspiring.

He addressed her, holding his left hand out with his plan. "Nan," he said, controlling his voice, "these men were getting ready to marry you to Gale Morgan. No matter how you feel toward me, you know me well enough to know that all I want is the truth: Was this with your consent?"

She stepped into the line of fire between her cousin and De Spain as she answered: "No. You know I shall never marry any man but you. This vile bully"—she turned a little to look at her angry cousin—"has influenced Duke Duke—who never before tried to persecute or betray me—into joining him in this thing. They never could have dragged me into it alive. And they've kept me locked up for three days in a room upstairs, hoping to break me down."

"Stand back, Nan."

If De Spain's words of warning struck her with terror of a situation she could not control, she did not reveal it. "No," she said resolutely. "If anybody here is to be shot, I'll be first. Uncle Duke, you have always protected me from Gale Morgan; now you join hands with him. You drive me from this roof because I don't know how I can protect myself under it."

Gale looked steadily at her. "You promised to marry me," he muttered truculently. "I'll find a way to make you keep your word."

A loud knocking interrupted him, and, without waiting to be admitted, Pardaloe, the cowboy, opened the front door and stalked boldly in from the hall.

If the situation in the room surprised him, he gave no evidence of it. And as he walked in Nan disappeared. Pardaloe was drenched with rain, and, taking off his hat as he crossed the room to the fire, he shook it hard into the blazing wood.

"What do you want, Pardaloe?" snapped Duke.

Pardaloe shook his hat once more and turned a few steps so that he stood between the uncurtained window and the light. "The creek's up," he said to Duke in his peculiarly slow, steady tone. "Some of Satt's boys are trying to get the cattle out of the lower corral." He fingered his hat, looked first at Duke, then at Gale, then at De Spain. "Guess they'll need a little help, so I asked Sassoon to come over—" Pardaloe jerked his head indicatively toward the front. "He's outside with some of the boys now."

"Tell Sassoon to come in here!" thundered Gale.

De Spain's left arm shot out. "Hold on, Pardaloe; pull down that curtain behind you!"

"Don't touch that curtain, Pardaloe!" shouted Gale Morgan.

"Pardaloe," said De Spain, his left arm pointing menacingly and walking instantly toward him, "pull that curtain or pull your gun, quick." At that moment Nan, in hat and coat, reappeared in the archway behind De Spain. Pardaloe jerked down the curtain and started for the door. De Spain had backed up again. "Stop, Pardaloe," he called. "My men are outside

that door. Stand where you are," he ordered, still enforcing his commands with his right hand covering the holster at his hip. "I leave this room first. Nan, are you ready?" he asked without looking at her.

"Yes."

Her uncle's face whitened. "Don't leave this house tonight, Nan," he said menacingly.

"You've forced me to, Uncle Duke," "Don't leave this house tonight."

"I can't protect myself in it."

"Don't leave this house—most of all, with that man!" He pointed at De Spain with a frenzy of hatred. Without answering, the two were retreating into the semi-darkness of the dining room. "Nan," came her uncle's voice, hoarse with feeling, "you're saying goodbye to me forever."

"No, uncle," she cried. "I am only doing what I have to do."

"I tell you I don't want to drive you from this roof, girl."

A rush of wind from an opening door was the only answer from the dark dining room. The two Morgans started forward together. The sudden gust sucked the flame of the living-room lamp up into the chimney and after a brief, sharp struggle extinguished it. In the confusion it was a moment before a match could be found. When the lamp was relighted, the Morgans ran into the dining room. The wind and rain poured in through the open north door. But the room was empty.

Duke turned on his nephew with a choking curse. "This," he cried, beside himself with fury, "is your work!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Flight.

De Spain, catching Nan's arm, spoke hurriedly, and they hastened outside toward the kitchen. "We must get away quick," he said as she buttoned her coat. And, knowing how she suffered in what she was doing, he drew her into the shelter of the porch and caught her close to him. "I'll take you straight to Mrs. Jeffries. When you are ready, you'll marry me; we'll make our peace with your Uncle Duke together. Great God! What a night! This way, dearie."

"No, to the stable, Henry! Where's your horse?"

"Under the pine, and yours, too. I found the pony, but I couldn't find your saddle, Nan."

"I know where it's hidden. Let's get the horses."

"Just a minute. I stuck my rifle under this porch." He stooped and felt below the stringer. Rising in a moment with the weapon on his arm, the



"This," He Cried, Beside Himself With Fury, "Is Your Work."

two hurried around the end of the house toward the pine tree. They had almost reached this when a murmur unlike the sounds of the storm made De Spain halt his companion.

"What is it?" she whispered. He listened intently. Without speaking, he took Nan and retreated to the corner of the house. "There is somebody in that pine," he whispered, "waiting for me to come after the horses. Sassoon may have found them. I'll try it out, anyway, before I take a chance. Stand back here, Nan."

He put her behind the corner of the house, threw his rifle to his shoulder, and fired as nearly as he could in the darkness toward and just above the pine. Without an instant's hesitation a pistol shot answered from the direction in which he had fired, and in another moment a small fusillade followed. "By the Almighty," muttered De Spain, "we must have our horses. Nan, stay right here. I'll try driving those fellows off their perch."

She caught his arm. "What are you going to do?"

"Run in on them from cover, wherever I can find it, Nan, and push them back. We've got to have those horses."

"If we could only get away without a fight!"

"This is Sassoon and his gang, Nan. You heard Pardaloe. These are not your people. I've got to drive 'em, or we're gone, Nan."

"Then I go with you."

"Nan, you can't do it," whispered De Spain energetically. "A chance bullet—"

She spoke with decision: "I go with you. I can use a rifle. Better both of us be killed than one. Help me up on this roof. I've climbed it a hundred times. My rifle is in my room. Quick, Henry."

Overruling his continued objections, she lifted her foot to his hand, put her second foot on De Spain's shoulder, gained the sloping roof, and scrambled on her hands and knees up

to the window of her room. A far-off peal of thunder echoed from the mountains. Luckily, no flash had preceded it, and Nan, rifle in hand, slid safely down to the end of the lean-to, where De Spain helped her to the ground. He directed her how to make a zigzag advance toward the pine, and, above all, to throw herself flat and sideways after every shot—and not to fire often.

In this way they advanced slowly but safely to the disputed point and then understood—the horses were gone. A fresh discharge of shots came from two directions—seemingly from the house and the stable. A moment later they heard sharp firing far down the gap—their sole avenue of escape.

They withdrew to the shelter of a large rock familiar to Nan even in the dark. While De Spain was debating in his mind how to meet the emergency, she stood at his side, his equal in courage, daring and resource, and answered his rapid questions as to possible gateways of escape. The rain, which had been abating, now ceased, but from every fissure in the mountains came the roar of rushing water, and little openings of rock and waterway that might have offered a chance when dry were now out of the question. In fact, it was Nan's belief that before morning water would be running over the main trail itself.

"Yet," said De Spain finally, "before morning we must be a long way from this particular spot. Nan, Sassoon has posted men at the neck of the gap—that's the first thing he would do. I'll tell you," he said suddenly, "as when after long uncertainty and anxious doubt one chooses an alternative and hastens to follow it. 'Retreat is the thing for us, Nan. Let's make for Music Mountain and crawl into our cave till morning. Lefever will get in here some time tomorrow. Then we can connect with him.'"

Realizing that no time was to be lost, they set out on the long journey. Every foot of the troublesome way offered difficulties. Water impeded them continually. Nan picked their trail. But for her perfect familiarity with every foot of the ground, they could not have got to the mountain at all. When they got to the mountain trail itself they found their way swept by a mad rush of falling water, its deafening roar punctuated by fragments of loosened rock which, swept downward from ledge to ledge, split and thundered as they dashed themselves against the mountainside. On a projected floor the two stood for a moment, listening to the roar of the cataract that had cut them off their refuge.

"No use, Nan," said De Spain. "There isn't any other trail, is there?"

She told him there was no other. "And this will run all night, Henry," she said, turning to him and as if thinking of a question she wanted to ask, "how did you happen to come to me tonight when I wanted you so?"

"I came because you sent for me," he answered simply.

"But I didn't send for you."

He stopped, dumfounded. "What do you mean, Nan?" he demanded unasily. "I got your message on the telephone last night, in my office at Sleepy Cat, from a man that refused to give his name."

"I never sent any message to you," she insisted in growing wonderment. "I have been locked in a room for three days, dearie. The Lord knows I wanted to send you word. Who ever telephoned a message like that? Was it a trap to get you in here?"

He told her the story—of the strenuous efforts he had made to discover the identity of the messenger—and how he had been balked. "No matter," said Nan at last. "It couldn't have been a trap. It must have been a friend, surely, not an enemy."

"Henry," every time she repeated his name De Spain cared less for what should happen in the rest of the world, "what are we going to do now? We can't stay here all night—and take what they will greet us with in the morning."

He answered her question with another: "What about trying to get out by El Capitan?"

She started in spite of herself. "It would be certain death, Henry."

"I don't mean at the worst to try to cross it till we get a glimpse of daylight. But it's quite a way over there. The question is, Can we find a trail up to where we want to go?"

"I know two or three," she answered, "if they are only not flooded."

The storm seemed to have passed, but the darkness was intense, and from above the northern Superstitions came low mutterings of thunder. Compelled to strike out over the rocks to get up to any of the trails toward El Capitan, Nan, helped by De Spain when he could help, led the ascent toward the first ledge they could hope to follow on their dangerous course.

The point at which the two climbed almost five hundred feet that night up Music Mountain is still pointed out in the gap. No person, looking at that confused wall, willingly believes it could ever have been scaled in the dead of night. Torn, bruised and exhausted, Nan, handed up by her lover, threw herself at last prostrate on the ledge at the real beginning of their trail, and from that vantage point they made their way along the eastern side of Music Mountain for two miles before they stopped again to rest.

It was already well after midnight. A favoring spot was seized on by De Spain for the resting place he wanted. A dry recess beneath an overhanging wall made a shelter for the fire that he insisted on building to warm Nan in her soaked clothing. It was dangerous, both realized, to start a fire, but they concealed the blaze as best

they could and took the chance—a chance that more nearly than any that had gone before, cost them their lives.

The mutterings above the mountains now grew rapidly louder, and while the two hovered over the fire, a thunder squall, rolling wildly down the eastern slope, burst over the gap. Nan knew even better than her companion the fickle nature of a range storm, and understood uncomfortably well how a sudden shift might, at any moment, lay their entire path open to its ferocity. She warned De Spain they must be moving, and, freshened by the brief rest, they set out toward El Capitan.

They had covered more than half the distance that separated them from the cliff, when a second thunderstorm seeming to rush in from the desert, burst above their heads. Drenched with rain, they were forced to draw back under a projecting rock. In another moment the two storms, meeting in the gap, rushed together. As if an unseen hand had touched a thousand granite springs above the gap, every slender crevice spouted a stream that shot fuming out from the mountainsides. The sound of moving waters rose in a dull, vast roar, broken by the unseen boom of distant falls, launching huge masses of water into caverns far below. The storm-laden wind tore and whirled among the crowded peaks, and above all the angry sky moaned and quivered in the rage of the elements.

It was only the hills between the sharp squalls that enabled them to cover the trail before daylight. When they paused before El Capitan the fury of the night seemed largely to have exhausted itself, but the overcharged air hung above the mountains, trembling and moaning like a bruised and stricken thing. Lightning, playing across the tony heavens, blazed in constant sheets from end to end of the horizon. Under it all the two refugees, high on the mountainside, looked down on the flooding gap.

Their flight was almost ended. Only the sheer cliff ahead blocked their descent to the aspen grove. Hardly a moment passed after they had started until the eastern sky lightened before the retreating storm, and with the first glimmer of daylight the two were at the beginning of the narrow footpath which lay for half a mile between them and safety.

The face of El Capitan presents, midway, a sharp convex. Just where it is thrown forward in this keen angle, the trail runs out almost to a knife-edge, and the mountain is so nearly vertical that it appears to overhang the floor of the valley.

They made half the stretch of this angle with hardly a misstep, but the advance for a part of the way was a climb, and De Spain, turning once to speak to Nan, asked her for her rifle, that he might carry it with his own. What their story might have been had she given it to him, none can tell. But Nan, holding back, refused to let him relieve her. The drenched angle which had hampered De Spain all night was safely turned on hands and knees, and as they rounded it toward the east, clouds scurrying over the open desert broke and shot the light of dawn against the beetling arete.

De Spain turned in some relief to point to the coming day. As he did so a gust of wind, sweeping against the sheer wall, tipped him sideways, and he threw himself on his knees to avoid the dizzy edge. His rifle, which lay under his hand on the rock, slipped from reach. In the next instant he heard it bouncing from rock to rock, five hundred feet below.

Greatly annoyed and humiliated, he regained his feet and spoke with a laugh to reassure Nan. Just as she answered not to worry, a little singing scream struck their ears; something splashed suddenly close at hand against the rock wall; chips scattered between them. From below, the sound of a rifle report cracked against the face of the cliff. They were so startled, so completely amazed, that they stood motionless.

De Spain looked down and over the uneven floor of the gap. The ranch-houses, spread like toys in the long perspective, lay peacefully revealed in the gray of the morning. He could discover no sign of life around any of the houses. But in another moment the little singing scream came again, the blow of the heavy slug against the splintering rock was repeated, the distant report of the rifle followed.

"Under fire," muttered De Spain. He looked at Nan. "We'd better keep moving," he said. "Come! whoever is shooting can follow us a hundred yards either way." In front of De Spain a fourth bullet struck the rock. "Nan," he muttered, "I've got you into a fix. If we can't stop that fellow, he is liable to stop us. Can you see anything?" he asked, waiting for her to come up.

"Henry!" She was looking straight down into the valley, and laid her hand on De Spain's shoulder. "Is there anything moving on the ridge—over there—just east of Sassoon's?"

De Spain, his eyes bent on the point Nan indicated, drew her forward to a dip in the trail which, to one stretched flat, afforded a slight protection. He made her lie down, and just beyond her refuge chose a point where the path, broadening a little and rising instead of sloping toward the outer edge, gave him a chance to brace himself between two rocks. Flattened there like a target in midair, he threw his hat down to Nan, and, resting on one knee, waited for the shot that should tumble him down El Capitan or betray the man bent on killing him.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Always the Way. "I know a man who wants to take out fifty thousand dollars' worth of life insurance." "You do. Who is he?" "A friend of mine who tried to get a thousand dollars' worth the other day and was rejected by the doctors."

In No Position to Learn. "What is the latest news?" "I don't know," replied Mr. Meekton. "The newspapers are all censored, and Henrietta has quit going to tens."

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